

GEORGE LATSHAW:
ESTABLISHING A TRADITION OF PUPPETRY IN PUERTO RICO

By Manuel A. Morán, Ph.D.

During the 1960s in Puerto Rico Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero created a project to take puppet theatre and artistic recreation for children to the rural areas of the country. There was a real need for this because Puerto Rico lacked a tradition in children's theatre, especially puppet theatre. In an interview with Guillermo Villarronda (1968), Santiago Lavandero said: "In Puerto Rico there is not one recorded instance that indicates the presence of puppetry in the past". This is why in 1965, because of the efforts of Santiago Lavandero and the Teatro Escolar program, and by virtue of United States Congressional Law number 89-10, Title I, funds were approved to permit the establishment of an experimental project titled the "MIR—Minitatro Infantil Rural."

In 1967, two luminaries in the art of puppetry, Ángeles Gasset from Spain and George Latshaw from the United States, were brought to Puerto Rico to lead workshops for fifteen teachers and fifteen high school graduate students in the art of puppetry



Photograph of Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero, Ángeles Gasset and George Latshaw, Minitatro Infantil Rural, (1967, Department of Education Archives)

Miss Ángeles Gasset, niece of Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, was directing a private school at the time and had been using puppetry as a medium in teaching elementary education.

Santiago Lavandero was quoted as saying,

The vast experience and talent of these persons make them extraordinary figures for our benefit. We are determined to establish in Puerto Rico the tradition of puppetry as an effective vehicle of elementary education. (p. 18)

Interview with George Latshaw

I first met George Latshaw in the summer of 1999 at the Puppeteers of America's (PofA) National Puppet Festival in Seattle, Washington. I had recently joined the PofA and was very excited to be part of my first puppet festival that summer. George Latshaw, who was one of the pillars for this organization, was to announce his retirement as the publisher of *The Puppetry Journal*, a quarterly journal dedicated to the art of puppetry in the United States. He had founded the journal in 1949 and had been the editor and publisher since then.

During the 1999 Festival, the PofA established the George Latshaw Award for accomplishments in writing and publishing in the field of puppetry. Many of the events were related and dedicated to Latshaw. He started reminiscing and telling all of us stories about his experiences in Puerto Rico. That's when I realized that in spite of the fact that these events had happened more than thirty years ago, they were vibrant and fresh in his mind. It was obvious that the time he spent in Puerto Rico was quite memorable.

In June 2002, while attending an UNIMA Puppeteer's International Conference "Puppets 2002 Festival," at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, I met George Latshaw once again. I immediately requested an interview, and he agreed. We met for dinner at the restaurant of the hotel where we were staying. His wife joined us for the interview.

The sections that follow are a narrative to the history of the MIR based on archival materials and newspaper articles. Segments of the interview have been structured to supplement and enhance this narrative and enrich it with the unique personal experiences related by Latshaw.



Photograph of Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero and George Latshaw (1968, Department of Education Archives)

The First Summer in Puerto Rico

Here is how George Latshaw described the beginnings:

Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero invited me down. Now, whether he had been through the gamut of other people, or just what, before I wended up on the list, I don't remember now.

I also worked with teachers in the *Programa de Teatro Escolar* and they were being trained to do, you know, in the classroom, teaching.

So, the first year we had a very happy time of Leo and me working with all the puppets and so forth. Antonio Pérez was very impressive. He was young and very handsome and he had the kind of personality that everybody liked,.... Rafael Ruiz was another one. And he was, really, a natural puppeteer. I could not believe, when I saw him, the second summer. Here's a man who really should have been a puppeteer. And it has broken my heart, ... that he was not able to pursue that.

They were to sleep in the schoolyard. And I don't know how they resolved this. Evidently they were a star attraction for people were peeking in on them. There was one team the first year. And they did both

theatre and the puppets. They did two of the Ángeles Gasset shows, *Palos* and *El rey*.

Adrián García became a television comedian. ...he stuttered, but never when he was on the stage. He had a different persona and also he had lines so he knew what he was going to say. But I couldn't survive the summer, I think, without Adrián as a translator....

Latshaw (1967) described the MIR in his article "Creating a Puppet Theatre Tradition in Puerto Rico," published in The Children's Theatre Review:

In the summer of 1966 I made my first trip to Puerto Rico to help launch the Minitatro Infantil Rural, a pilot project which Dr. Lavandero had designed for elementary schools. Minitatro was literally a "rolling theatre" (erected on the back of a six-passenger pick-up truck) that would accommodate the productions of both "live" and puppet plays. A sizable stage deck was cantilevered from the truck bed to give elevation to the acting areas. Performances were to be held in the open air of schoolyards or playgrounds. Scenery consisted of a unit set, which could be converted into a thrust puppet stage with the addition of a wrap-around masking apron. Puppeteers worked overhead, while seated on low rolling stools on the stage deck.

Latshaw commented on this particular in the article published in The Children's Theatre Review:

The success of the demonstration year led to the creation of three Minitatro units during the summer of 1967. The "live" play was dropped, in favor of a smaller two-man company, which could travel with a repertory of three puppet plays. Portable puppet booth and gear was designed to stow neatly in a compact International Scout.

More staff was trained in the summer of 1967 in the puppetry seminar, for which then services of George Latshaw and Ángeles Gasset were again retained.

The Second Summer in Puerto Rico

Latshaw described his second summer in Puerto Rico as follows:

The second summer, when Ángeles Gasset was there, we trained three companies, and built all the puppets for them, with the same script. And we used to have staff meetings in Spanish. And I always listened so hard, and Leo would stop every once in a while, and say, "Do you understand where we are?" And I would say, "Oh, I can get it here and there okay."

Oh, so fast. The first year, Ruiz was the one who would always say “*entonces*” [then] and I didn’t know what “*entonces*” was.

...It was very lonely. I had a room out near the place where we had the workshops and lessons and so forth. And then the meals were in the kitchen facing the wall and the grandmothers do the cooking. And Puerto Rican rice and beans are like no other place in the world. Yeah, I had not been able to find a recipe or anything that would satisfy the *sofrito*, you know. I could sit and eat loads all day.

It also impressed me when I occasionally went out to drink with the boys, and the little places where they had a *vitrola* [jukebox], this is before they had karaoke. A little corner, a little platform and a spotlight, and the boys each had a poem that they knew, and I said, you know, “Is this from your high school days?” No, no, it was something that each one of them had. [It was] personal and romantic and flowery, you know, I was so impressed.

But anyway, then I really began to feel, well, I loved the people; they were so warm—so good to me.

According to Latshaw, that second summer in Puerto Rico was difficult for him. While the people treated him well, it was the only summer that he spent in Puerto Rico without his wife and children.

The Third Summer in Puerto Rico

So, the boys came down and we got an apartment in Hato Rey and that was really quite wonderful, because now we were really in a community, you know, tile floors. So in the third summer, they were training nine troops, that was a factory, you know by that time, in order to build the puppets for all nine companies.

All of the nine companies produced the same puppet show. “La princesa calva.” You know, I was very encouraged when they showed me the script from that. [However,] I decided at that time that it was not right to keep using Ángeles Gasset’s scripts because they were from Spain, and a lot of people related to Spain, but there was no real, well, Juan Bobo [local]stories. The things that would mean something to the people on the island. In that sense I thought I had served my role, which had been to get it started and to train.



Photograph of puppetry seminar (1967, Department of Education Archives)

At this time, Leopoldo Santiago Lavandero used the books of Ángeles Gasset to adapt into children's plays. The illustrations in the books were used as the basis for the puppets that were the story's characters. When asked if these performances were recorded, he said:

I don't recall if it was ever a recorded show. I don't like that, because it makes it sort of artificial, you know. There is no way that one can play with the audience. ... I feel that when you perform it's like a game: you and they are working together, and they feed you and you feed them, and you both get out of this something good.

A Vision for the Island

As George Latshaw came to the end of his account of the three summers he spent in Puerto Rico, his thoughts turned to the broader picture of the vision and purpose of the educational theatre program:

Leo is a fantastic draftsman, his plans and designs for the first season. I didn't realize what an important step Leo was taking. I mean, you know, I have worked in education, I have worked as a professional performer,

and so forth, but he had a vision for the island, in terms of culture and that was why the boys that he drew were graduates from the theatre program in high schools, and that was wonderful. It gave them training, it gave them the possibility of a career, and also served the needs that they could go to, you know, all the mountain schools. We didn't see that area, I didn't see that area.

After the third year, I did not want to go back to make more "factory." I thought there were enough people who knew enough that they could sort it out themselves, and evidently they did. I may have been an impediment in a way, having been there so long, but I was very proud of the people, and what they did.

The Puerto Rican people gave me so much, their warmth, graciousness. You know, it's wonderful. The fact about seeing it all taking place, it was very exciting.

After the interview concluded, we continued talking informally. I gave him updates on people in Puerto Rico with whom he had lost touch. Latshaw mentioned to me that after he left Puerto Rico, he continued to keep in touch with Santiago Lavandero and his wife in Puerto Rico. When Lavandero retired and moved to Florida, Latshaw and his wife visited them often. I also expressed to him that he was instrumental in the development of puppetry in Puerto Rico. He said he was very surprised to hear that comment; he didn't know how much his work and training had influenced and helped in the development of the field on the island.

I had a great affection for the people, and it looked to me like the society of the future, because there were people who were white, or tanned or brown. But it was the whole mix together, you know, which is the way the world should be.



Photograph on the day of the interview of George Latshaw (shown with his wife Pat) at the Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, June 2002. Photograph by Manuel A. Morán Martínez. (Used by permission of the author.)

Afterward: The Latshaw Legacy

Following the puppetry seminars, some of Latshaw's students became part of the Miniteatro Infantil Rural, taking puppet theatre to elementary school students in the country's rural zones.

After more than 13 years of developing and exhibiting the art of puppetry in the country, the Teatro Escolar was compelled to reduce this focus because of a lack of funding and personnel, as the majority of those specialized in this field were no longer part of the Department of Education. Utilization of the art of puppetry in the Puerto Rican schools waned. Despite being kept in the curriculum by the Teatro Escolar, lack of supervision and training prevented continued growth. However, the children in the public education system are still exposed to puppetry thanks to recreational and cultural programs presented annually at the schools by professional puppetry companies that are invited by the schools.

One of the MIR's greatest achievements in Puerto Rico was the raising of the art of puppetry to the level of a profession. The majority of professional puppet theatre companies in Puerto Rico were founded by former members of the MIR. As indicated in the article "Nuestros títeres triunfan en Washington," the MIR had engendered a profession:

Most of the specialists in Puerto Rico who presently labor in this discipline were trained by said program and were part of the Rural Children's Minitheatre units, which delighted children in the island's countryside and towns with their

performances. The utilization of this art in the school system, in many universities, and in other private institutions, as well as its use in television, is undoubtedly an achievement of this program.

Notwithstanding the waning of the focus of educational puppetry, the Teatro Escolar program, by means of the MIR, consolidated the use of puppets as a resource to facilitate the learning and teaching processes. In the article "Los títeres: maestros ejemplares," published in El Nuevo Día newspaper, Nydita S. de Rodríguez (1975) commented on the use of puppets as a vehicle for teaching and on their positive effect on children:

The innovation of puppetry in teaching has proven to be extremely positive in children's education. And this has not just been borne out by the members of the school theatre program. Innumerable mothers have attested to the favorable effects of broadcast television programming such as Sesame Street. It is not rare to have children two to three years of age counting from one to ten or repeating a vocabulary they have assimilated thanks to a dialogue with puppets.

Since 1966, the purpose of the MIR in the Puerto Rican educational system was to positively influence the students' taste for theatre and for puppet theatre. The proliferation of puppet theatre clubs in the country's schools is additional proof of this influence. In these clubs the children and youth design and construct puppets, and stage productions that evidence the impact of the program. As indicated in a 1967 government evaluation of the Minitatro Infantil Rural, the program was "an innovation in cultural enrichment programming as well as in pedagogic practice of enormous scope for the future development of theatre in Puerto Rico" (Dept. of Public Instruction, 1967, p. 1).

Manuel Antonio Morán is the current Vice President of UNIMA-USA and the Founder and Artistic Director of SEA. He holds a Ph.D. in Educational Theatre from New York University (NYU). He is an actor, writer and puppeteer who lives in New York City and maintains a residence in Puerto Rico. www.manuelmoran.com